

News Column
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COLOSTRUM

My wife is the nurse, but it was my 10-year-old daughter that grabbed the lamb and put the tube down its throat many years ago when I was away and had a lamb that needed help.

I wasn't there, of course, but in my mind I imagine the nurse was probably still asking questions and worrying about what might go wrong when the kid finished the job. Sometimes a little ignorance is helpful. Samantha had seen me tube lots of lambs by the time she was 10 – I'm sure she thought there was nothing to it.

I guess she was right. She got the job done.

The hardest part about tubing a lamb – the first time or two – is just deciding to go for it. Despite all the cautions about making sure you get the tube in the right spot, it isn't hard at all. Aim for the left side of the throat, where the esophagus is located, and the tube will slide right down.

I suppose I've tubed a couple hundred lambs by now, without any disasters. With chilled lambs it is important to warm them up to where they can hold their head up before trying to tube them, but there aren't too many concerns. The benefit of tubing lambs – and getting colostrum in their bellies soon after birth – far outweighs any concerns of sending the tube down the wrong pipe.

You might wonder why we tube so many lambs instead of just letting them get up and nurse on their own. That's a good question and the answer is simple. I have a day job and can't

go back and check two hours later to be sure they have nursed.

We tube lambs that are born in the evening too because I like to sleep at night. If I put five ounces of colostrum in a newborn lamb at night (and it isn't super cold), the lamb will be OK in the morning and will almost always be nursing on its own.

Colostrum is the first milk, containing antibodies that freely pass through the lining of the digestive system and directly into the bloodstream in the first hours after birth. It is important to get colostrum in a lamb (or calf) soon after birth, ideally within two hours.

Research done with calves shows there is 50% closure of the gut lining by nine hours after birth, making it that much less efficient for antibodies in colostrum to pass into the bloodstream.

That's why it is important for calves to get colostrum sooner rather than later. The old rule of thumb for getting colostrum in a calf used to be 24 hours,.... but that is too late.

The goal should be two hours, and most calves will do that on their own. In fact, calves will often be nursing within 30 minutes after birth. If they haven't nursed within 12 hours, action needs to be taken immediately. Waiting another 12 hours will greatly increase the chance of long-term health problems with that calf.

Ideally, a calf will consume about 5% of its body weight in colostrum in the first 30 minutes to two hours after being born. By 12 hours after birth, a calf should have consumed about 10% of its body weight in colostrum. That's about a gallon for an average size calf.

Calves are a bit tougher than lambs and can often withstand colder temperatures without needing to come in the house to warm up. It is also harder to catch a cow and milk her, so I wouldn't be tubing a couple hundred calves if I was still in the cow business.

Just like our lambs though, calves need colostrum soon after birth to get off to a good

start. If a calf hasn't nursed within 8-12 hours after being born, it is time to take action. Waiting another 12 hours is a really bad idea.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmclure@ksu.edu.

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